



The collaboration between luxury design house Louis Vuitton and the Arabic calligraphiti street artist eL Seed is more than just an edgy fashion partnership. The entrance of street art into mainstream high fashion reflects the increasing influence of ‘the street’ in the broader political and social landscape. Cassidy Hazelbaker explores the origins of calligraphy and how this pertinent visual art form has been reinterpreted both in the luxury world and throughout the streets of the Middle East.



#### CALLIGRAPHY

The written word has always been at the center of the Islamic visual tradition. Though illustrated depictions of Allah are considered to be inherently inadequate and thus forbidden, calligraphy is thought to be a fine example of divine beauty. For centuries, calligraphy was the means of spreading the Quran, and as such, the art form has evolved according to very rigid standards. Those standards are still strictly enforced, ensuring that the writing remains unchanged throughout the centuries.

Arabic calligraphy is divided into two styles: geometric and cursive scripts. There are several official fonts within the two styles, each having strict guidelines of the formation of each letter in order to preserve the integrity of the calligraphy. Much like the use of geometric patterns in Islamic art, said to represent infinite faith and Allah’s eternity, Arabic calligraphy is categorized by elegant, measured curves and lines. The result is a decadent yet methodical writing form. In line with calligraphy’s sophisticated form the respected Japanese Arabic calligrapher Honda Coichi explains that, “combining letters creates a sort of rhythm—silent yet musical flow.”

#### GRAFFITI

Graffiti—the unsanctioned placement of writing or words on public spaces, usually by paint—is commonly associated with hip-hop and rap culture, but actually dates back to ancient times, with some of the earliest examples of graffiti dating to ancient Egypt. Though

territorial graffiti done by gangs is considered to be vandalism, contemporary graffiti artists are creating their artwork in public spaces. This street art is a powerful platform for reaching the public, and often contains a strong current of activism.

#### EI SEED & LOUIS VUITTON

Tunisian artist eL Seed grew up in a Parisian suburb and started creating graffiti as a teen. The influence of his roots and his family’s mother tongue led him to start incorporating Arabic letters in his work at an early age, but it was not until his late twenties that he started seriously combining his love of calligraphy with his graffiti. However, once he did, he knew immediately that he had found his calling.

When asked about the difficulty of transcribing the delicate shape of calligraphy onto a large wall, eL Seed explained that his murals are a very active affair. “I use the flow of my physical movements to create calligraphy. When I use the movements of my entire body, it makes it easier for me to create large curves and lines,” he explains.

eL Seed describes himself as “someone with a foot in one world, and the second in another,” an identity which spills over into his work. His art similarly promotes peace and humanity through usually secular messages. His blog recounts the story of a man who had given permission for one of his walls to be painted only to demand the graffiti be removed after he saw that it was in Arabic writing. eL Seed explains that the







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man’s fear and misunderstanding of the Middle East led to his reaction. The original mural was erased as requested, but on a public wall facing the man’s property, eL Seed erected a new mural, consisting of the phrase “Open your heart”.

eL Seed also carries the theme of peace and tolerance in his work, declaring it free from any political or religious affiliations. “I have been to a lot of different cities that have been open to Islamic and Middle Eastern art, and I would like to encourage different societies to emulate this,” he states. “Being open to other individuals, cities and societies enables us to create bridges and learn from our differences, helping us to grow in positive directions,” the artist declares. “The poem I used for the Louis Vuitton collaboration is my way of encouraging this openness.”

eL Seed chose four verses from the poem *Venice Carnival* written in his trademark calligraffiti text to grace Louis Vuitton scarves. Written by the Palestinian poet Taha Mohammad Ali, the poem praises the city of for her beauty and elegance. During the 12th century, contrary to most European ports, the city of Venice remained receptive to Islamic influence, and also one of the few places of interaction and exchange between Europe and the Arab world. In selecting this poem, eL Seed paid homage to a city open to others. “I have been to a lot of different cities that have been open to Islamic and Middle Eastern art, and I would like to

encourage different societies to emulate this,” says eL Seed. The scarves contain a base of regal blue with the iconic LV monogram in a bronze color, covered with a gold calligraphy pattern and a corner which is layered with neon pink or blue calligraffiti letters.

#### STREET ART IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Calligraffiti is no stranger to walls. Mosques, universities and private residences have been adorned with the art form for centuries. The inscriptions are often phrases from the Quran, thoughtfully placed in order to make the message most relevant to the audience. For example, the domes of mosques are adorned with verses from the Quran about light. This idea of artistically conveying a message in the most meaningful place possible is paralleled by the idea of street art, which makes use of the most prominent and optimum public spaces to broadcast its message.

Though some of the earliest examples of street art have been found in the Middle East, graffiti has not yet been commonly seen in the region until recent times. However, in the midst of tense political situations occurring throughout much of the region, people are taking their pens, paint and chalk to roads, walls, sidewalks, and oftentimes the headquarters of political parties or residences of personalities whom they dislike. Messages of peace and understanding, such as the ones eL Seed promotes, are sometimes the subject of street art. More often, they commemorate

activists who have died, depict bloody violence, and call for justice from perceived perpetrators of crime. In many places, the creative use of such urban canvases that were previously forbidden has now proliferated and can be deemed a side effect of regime change and altered domestic priorities.

Calligraffiti, whether created by an international artist or a passionate citizen, is often erased or fades away with time, living only through memory. eL Seed believes that though much of his work has a limited lifespan, its legacy lives on through photos of each piece. However, the impact of street art always looms large for eL Seed. Walking down the street, the ordinary, static objects which are present daily and indefinitely – a trash can, a door, a parked car – hardly last in one’s mind. A striking mural such as eL Seed’s neon graphic calligraphy, though often remaining on a wall for a limited duration, leaves a permanent impression – a lasting message within one’s visual memory. In line with this idea, the writer Eugene Ionesco stated, “only the ephemeral is of lasting value.”

eL Seed’s pink scarf for Louis Vuitton is available exclusively in Dubai as part of a pre-launch that took place on 18 March. It will be available worldwide from 1 July. The blue scarf is available exclusively in Dubai and is part of limited run which launched on 18 March.

# MUST HAVE: CELINE TRAPEZE BAG

By Cassidy Hazelbaker

As spring leads into summer, it’s time to shed extra frills and display the simple elegance of the Celine Trapeze bag.



The beauty of this classic handbag is found in the simplicity of its design. It features clean, sleek lines and extra wide gusset sides. While the top handle is long enough to fit over your shoulder to leave your hands free, the tote can also be carried in your hand or rest in the crux of your arm. In addition, the exotic skins and bright neutral color-blocking tones featured in Celine’s Spring line add depth and dimension

to this statement-making model. The Trapeze is multicolor in Calfskin Deepsea and beige reflecting the neutrals of this season’s color palette. A versatile tote, the smooth lines of this refined bag are strong enough to support you while shopping, spa-ing or working by day, and yet sharp enough to accompany you during a night out with friends.

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